

growth. When one is out of balance, so is the other. Many of these concepts are similar to those used in systems theory. These similarities are discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

### Applying Ecological Theory

Now let us look at Juan's situation from the point of view of ecological theory. Looking at Juan's microsystem, you could assess his developmental status as a teenager, all the settings in which Juan interacts, and the roles he plays in each. These areas might include his physical, emotional, and cognitive development; the physical environment of his home, school, church, and neighborhood; his interactions with his family, teachers, peers, social worker (you), and priest; and his roles of son, student, friend, and parishioner. You would also want to explore how Juan perceives his roles and interactions within each of these settings.

In Juan's mesosystem, you would want to consider how two or more of the systems within Juan's environment interact to influence his development as well as how Juan interacts with people and situations within these settings. For example, you could examine the interplay between Juan's home and school life and between his home and church life. You could also look at how Juan's neighborhood affects all the other settings in which he is involved.

Juan's exosystem would consist of facets such as the manufacturing plant where his father worked, the policies of his school and school district regarding support for struggling students, his mother's physician and the health care system where she receives care, bars or other places where his father goes to drink (if his father leaves the home to drink), and community agencies that could provide support for Juan. You would assess various factors in Juan's environment that affect him indirectly but that could potentially impact his development.

The macrosystem would involve issues such as local, national, and international economic pressures; school policies regarding educational standards; societal attitudes about families, teenagers, and minoritized groups; tenets within Hispanic/Latinx culture and their interactions with societal expectations about roles, norms, and expectations of individuals; and other factors such as laws and social policies that can affect individual lives.

In addition to assessing the levels on which Juan is experiencing problems, you would need to assess the ways in which Juan is dealing with his problems and how his interactions with others and his environment are affecting his functioning and development. In doing this, you would assess how Juan's transactions with others and his environment are affecting his well-being, how well Juan seems to adapt and cope with problems and new situations, how energy is expended and replenished in his life, and how Juan's interdependence with others and his environment both supports and hinders his well-being.

Given all of this information, you would need to make some decisions about which factors in Juan's environment are exerting the greatest influences on his development

At the same time, systems theory provides a broad look at client problems, and it considers people as active, living beings who are an integral part of a dynamic environment. The concepts used in this theory are effective at explaining behavior and problems, and they go a long way to inform work with clients. For example, concepts such as boundaries or homeostasis can be easy to use for assessment and intervention, particularly when working with families or organizations, even if these concepts can be difficult to explain to clients.

A growing body of literature explores these concepts and uses of systems theory in social work. This research provides an empirical foundation for social workers who want to apply this theory to their work with clients and who want to better understand its effectiveness when used for intervention.

## ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Originally developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), **ecological theory** explains human development by describing aspects of the individual, the environment, and the interaction between the two. Ecological theory argues that people are actively involved in their environments and their own development (versus some developmental theories that argue that people are passive—they do not play an active role in their development) and that both development and environments are always changing. People are born with both negative and positive tendencies, and they are influenced equally by nature and nurture. Development, then, is influenced by the actions of the individual, occurrences within the individual's environment, and the interactions between the two.

A fundamental tenet of ecological theory is that the way people *perceive* their environments and experiences significantly affects their well-being. Specifically, the meaning that people place on the events that happen to them and the way they interpret these events in the context of their environments have a major impact on how these events influence their well-being. For example, two people living in the same community may have different reactions to economic downturns that cause both of them to lose their jobs. One person may view unemployment as a crisis in which he will be unable to pay bills and support his family. This prospect may leave him feeling depressed and hopeless, which may mean that he needs mental health support to cope with the situation and to find the motivation to look for employment. Conversely, another person may view her unemployment as an opportunity to return to school or develop new skills, which will lead to a job that is more enjoyable or profitable. She may feel relieved, or even liberated, by being “forced” to take a new direction in her life.

Clearly this example oversimplifies the situation of unemployment and people's reactions to it. However, it does highlight the importance of people's perceptions of their circumstances, a key tenet of ecological theory. Indeed, this concept is central to social work and to this book: Regardless of how problems may appear to